

Findings and Recommendations from the 2025 Oregon Public Records Transparency Survey

DRAFT Prepared for the Public Records Advisory Council Survey Subcommittee

Introduction

In 2025, the Public Records Advisory Council conducted a statewide survey of Oregon public bodies to understand how agencies manage public records requests, what challenges they face, and what improvements could strengthen transparency. The responses represent a sample cross-section of state agencies, cities, counties, special districts, and educational institutions.

Agencies were asked about request volumes, staffing, timeliness, resources, training, and their experience interacting with requestors. The survey also included open-ended questions where respondents described obstacles, needs, and recommendations.

This report summarizes the major themes and provides recommendations to guide the Public Records Advocate, state legislators and policymakers, and individual public bodies.

Major Findings

1. Staffing and Time Constraints Are the Most Universal Challenge

Across agency sizes, the most common theme was insufficient staffing dedicated to public records work. Many agencies rely on one coordinator who also performs other full-time duties.

“There is one public records coordinator for the agency whose job is divided into other duties as well.”

High-volume agencies in particular noted that email searches, legal review, and complex redactions take substantial time.

Agencies reported that when they cannot meet statutory timelines, it is because of limited capacity.

2. Public Understanding of the Records Process Is a Significant Barrier

Many agencies reported that requestors misunderstand:

- what qualifies as a “public record,”
- that agencies are not required to answer questions or create records, and
- why legal review and redactions take time.

“There is a serious lack of understanding of what a record is and what the PRR process can do for them....There is also a sincere problem with the culture of immediacy.”

Agencies emphasized that public frustration often stems from unrealistic expectations or lack of clarity about the legal process.

3. Digital Tools and New Software Improve Efficiency

Several respondents reported significant improvements after implementing:

- centralized request-tracking systems,
- modernized email search tools,
- digital redaction software, and
- dedicated public portals for submitting requests.

These tools reduce staff burden and help smaller agencies keep up with deadlines.

4. Complexity of Public Records Law Affects Both Staff and the Public

Agencies noted that their own staff struggle to stay up-to-date on exemptions, retention rules, and statutory requirements.

“Complexity of public records laws, leading to limited understanding among both the public and City staff.”

The law’s complexity amplifies the time required to process requests, increasing the need for training and central resources.

5. Survey Design Challenges Limited Some Responses

Some agencies expressed difficulty completing the survey itself. Issues included:

- Questions requiring **numeric answers** when text explanations were needed
- Substantial staff time required
- Inconsistent internal tracking across decentralized departments
- Difficulty estimating statistics when data is not centrally recorded

“This survey took an estimated 40 hours of staff time across multiple departments.”

This suggests that the next survey may need redesign for clarity and flexibility.

6. Agencies Proposed Concrete Solutions

Common themes included:

Centralization

Some agencies want centralized units for records processing to improve expertise, consistency, and timeliness.

“DOC would benefit from truly centralizing this work... This would allow the work to be done by people who are able to focus on just this work.”

More Training

Eleven agencies explicitly requested additional training opportunities for staff and elected leaders.

One suggested short, on-demand video modules rather than live training through Workday.

Public Education Resources

Some asked for a statewide “requestor education” resource to reduce confusion and improve the quality of incoming requests.

“A state public records requesters resource page or handout to point people to when they are struggling to tailor a broad request or navigate the process.”

Recommendations

The recommendations below are grouped by audience:

1. **Public Records Advocate (PRA Office)**
 2. **State Government**
 3. **Individual Agencies**
-

1. Recommendations for the Public Records Advocate

A. Advertise Existing Resources and Create Public Education Materials

- Publish a statewide “How to Make a Public Records Request” guide.
 - This document already exists through a 2019 effort at Open Oregon, a chapter of the National Freedom of Information Coalition. The PRA has already added it to the website here: [Public Records Resources](#).
- Produce short videos explaining:
 - what a public record is,
 - how exemptions and redactions work,

- why timelines vary,
 - what agencies can and cannot do.
- Provide templates for agencies to embed these resources on their websites.
- Publish a database of the agency, request email address, URL for records request policy and URL for public interest waiver.

B. Follow Up to Offer Training to the 11 Agencies

- Offer services to the 11 agencies that identified training as an area of need

C. Improve Future Survey Design

- Add a reminder that most questions are optional.
 - Allow both numeric and text responses where appropriate.
-

2. Recommendations for State Government (Legislature, Governor, State CIO, Budget Offices)

A. Encourage a Transparency First Mindset

- Reinforce to state agencies that any and all taxpayer funding is given with an expectation of transparency and accountability. Responding to public records requests is integral to the work of government, not an “additional” or “extra” task.
- Publicize the work of the PRA and the training opportunities
- Create grant opportunities or budget lines for agencies—especially small local governments—to hire or train public records coordinators. Perhaps there could be a “flex” option for an expert to come in when public interest spikes and a high volume of requests happen.

B. Invest in Modern Record-Management Technology

- Incorporate “Transparency by Design” principles into software contracting — all government databases should be designed with public records requests in mind, such as offering a way to easily download data or easily redact exempt information.
- Support development of statewide or regional request-tracking platforms.

- Provide shared software licenses for search tools, redaction systems, and digital storage.

C. Encourage or Mandate Centralized Public Records Functions

For agencies with decentralized structures (e.g., DOC, ODOT, large counties), the state should:

- Encourage consolidation of records processing into specialized teams
- Establish guidelines for when centralization is required to meet statutory timelines
- Provide financial support for transition efforts

D. Simplify the Public Records Statutes

- The volume of exemptions and complexity of the law adds to staff time and public confusion.
-

3. Recommendations for Individual Agencies

A. Invest in Internal Training

- Ensure all staff and elected officials receive training on a culture of transparency.
- Ensure staff with records responsibilities receive ongoing training, including through PRA-provided materials.

B. Improve Public Communication

- Clearly explain:
 - how to submit a request,
 - expected timelines,
 - what constitutes a public record,
 - fee policies and waiver criteria.

Transparent communication reduces frustration and lowers staff workload.

C. Adopt Digital Tools Where Possible

- Implement email search tools, request-tracking systems, and digital redaction software.

- Use PRA or state-supported platforms if cost is prohibitive.

D. Consolidate Internal Processes

- Where possible, centralize your agency's records function rather than having each department track requests separately.
- Use standardized templates for acknowledgment letters, fee estimates, and "still processing" notices.

E. Track Data Consistently

- Even small agencies should maintain basic metrics (requests received, completed, timeframes, exemptions used) to identify trends and improve performance.
-

Conclusion

The 2025 survey reveals a system that is committed to transparency but strained by staffing limitations, legal complexity, and inconsistent resources across Oregon's public bodies. Agencies want to serve the public well, but they need practical tools, consistent training, and better-informed requestors to do so.

With coordinated action by the Public Records Advocate, state government, and individual agencies, Oregon can significantly reduce processing times, improve public understanding, and strengthen the transparency that underpins public trust.